



*A pamphlet put out by the Topeka Commercial Club just before WWI lauds the capital as a “thriving, progressive, prosperous city, where life is worth the effort and where human endeavor is abundantly rewarded.” The city’s successes were hard on certain of its residents, however, and their needs became the focus of the ministries of two of Topeka’s early residents—Charles Monroe Sheldon and Charles Fox Parham.*

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# CHARLES M. SHELDON AND CHARLES F. PARHAM

## Adapting Christianity to the Challenges of the American West

*by Alan F. Bearman and Jennifer L. Mills*

**T**he annals of American religious history are filled with energetic, creative, and seemingly larger than life characters. These figures were shaped not only by their individual dispositions and creeds, but also by the places where they proselytized. Geography, then, plays an important role in understanding American Christianity in the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Two of America's most important contributions to the history of Christianity—the Social Gospel and Pentecostalism—have significant ties to Topeka through the work of two of its early residents, Charles Monroe Sheldon and Charles Fox Parham. Yet, the Kansas roots of these manifestations of Christianity remain largely unknown. Specialists in American religious history know that Pentecostalism did not begin in Los Angeles on Azusa Street in 1906, but at Stone's Mansion (or Stone's Folly) in Topeka, Kansas, on New Year's Day 1901. Likewise, they know that the minister of Topeka's Central Congregational Church, Charles M. Sheldon, published *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* (1897) ten years before Walter Rauschenbusch penned his influential *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907). Insufficient research exists regarding the way place, particularly Topeka, shaped these expressions of Christianity. This essay seeks to begin to fill this void as it reintroduces Topeka as an important element in the history of both the Social Gospel and Pentecostalism.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Rhys H. Williams, "Religion, Community, and Place: Locating the Transcendent," *Religion and American Culture* 12 (Summer 2002): 249–63.

2. For the purposes of this essay, the authors use the following definitions from Daniel G. Reid et al., *Concise Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 319–20, 262–64: Social Gospel: "The term . . . came into prominence only at the beginning of the twentieth century, when it was used primarily to refer to a movement among North American Protestants to relate biblical and theological insights to the need for social reform"; Pentecostals: "All classical Pentecostals have in common at least one conviction: conversion to Christ should be followed by another intense experience of Spirit baptism. This baptism, classical Pentecostals insist, should be evidenced by tongues speech." See Charles M. Sheldon, *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* (Chicago: Advance Publishing, 1897); Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907).



*Topeka's founders had visions of grandeur for the so-called "Golden City," as reflected in the city's seal pictured here. However, by the 1890s a continuing influx of migrants, attracted by the promise of Topeka, outpaced the availability of work and increased stress upon the city's resources. Seal courtesy of the city of Topeka, Kansas.*

Kansas's unique situation in the geographic center of the United States made it home in the early twentieth century to a distinctive intersection of various peoples, ideas, and traditions. These factors combined with the difficulties of agricultural life and urbanization to provide a fertile environment for religious diversity and innovation. When reviewing Kansas religious history, Gary R. Entz noted that "since Kansas is located at a historic crossroads where Northerners, Southerners, immigrants, and Native Americans found access to the West, it is difficult to religiously pigeonhole the state." Later, in the same essay, Entz posited, "one commonality all newcomers to Kansas experienced was the difficulty in adapting to life on the Great Plains." He then explained how "new crops, new technologies, drought, and economic depression followed by debt combined to make settlement in the state more arduous than many had anticipated."<sup>3</sup> Cultural geographer James R. Shortridge described how settlers of the region identified this "harshness as an important regional characteristic." According to Shortridge early Kansas settlers embraced the harshness because it "presented a test of sorts, a way of winnowing out weak, undeserving settlers." Not everyone

3. Gary R. Entz, "Religion in Kansas: Review Essay," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 28 (Summer 2005): 122, 138.

embraced this philosophy of struggle, however. For example, the economic disparity that arose from such hardscrabble conditions—a disparity that to some was justified as the simple result of a kind of "up by the bootstraps" effort—allowed for the growing influence of Populism during the late nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

The church became one of Populism's targets, for, as Entz described, on the whole "the Populists excoriated organized religion because of the perception that mainstream churches had become inured toward their traditional role of defending the downtrodden."<sup>5</sup> Sheldon and Parham responded to the social iniquities of their day and to Populist demands to address them by focusing their energies upon caring for the less fortunate. In Topeka, where the difficulties of western agriculture met those of late-nineteenth-century urbanization, the Social Gospel and Pentecostalism emerged as central to the story of American religious history.

Surprisingly, scholars have not sufficiently identified the Social Gospel and Pentecostalism's shared concern for alleviating the stresses of life on the Great Plains, an impulse that shaped the nascent movements. Both the Social Gospel and Pentecostalism targeted those who often considered themselves unwelcome in the established denominations, giving the movements more in common than has generally been recognized by those who study them. In Topeka, Kansas, at the center of the country, agriculturalists, poor urban whites, and marginalized African Americans sought to overcome the hardships of the Great Plains as the city attempted to urbanize. In this place, new interpretations of Christianity found residence. The Social Gospel and Pentecostalism took root in Topeka because those who espoused these doctrines—including Sheldon and Parham—

4. James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 125.

5. Entz, "Religion in Kansas," 138. Among many studies of nineteenth-century Populism, see Gene Clanton, *A Common Humanity: Kansas Populism and the Battle for Justice and Equality* (Manhattan, Kans.: Sunflower University Press, 2004). Entz's statement should not be read to mean that all or even most Populists rejected or were not influenced by evangelical Christianity. Quite to the contrary, theirs was a reaction to the perceived failing of the organized church to adequately address the social and economic issues of the day. Populists were a diverse group. Some, especially among the leadership, did reject traditional Christianity, but most no doubt remained true to their Christian faith while supporting the People's Party ticket. See, for example, the comments of Rebecca Edwards in Worth Robert Miller, ed., "The Populist Vision: A Roundtable Discussion," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 32 (Spring 2009): 27–28; Joe Creech, *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Revolution* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Peter H. Argersinger, "Pentecostal Politics in Kansas: Religion, the Farmers' Alliance, and the Gospel of Populism," *Kansas Quarterly* 1 (Fall 1969): 24; Leland I. Lengel, "Radical Crusaders and a Conservative Church: Attitudes of Populists Toward Contemporary Protestantism," *American Studies* 13 (Fall 1972): 49; Timothy A. Miller, "Religion and Populism: A Reassessment," *Religion: The Scholarly Journal of Kansas School of Religion at the University of Kansas* 8 (January 1971): 1–5.



responded to the needs of the region's rural and urban poor and committed themselves to using their faith to improve the lives of those around them.

When it became the state capital in January 1861, Topeka began to see both its permanent and transient population increase. Kansans were required to travel to the city to conduct state business and connect to the government, and those who managed the state's affairs located their families in Topeka. In 1866 the legislature voted for and laid the first cornerstone of what became the permanent capitol on land donated by the Topeka Town Association in 1862. As one would expect, a substantial construction industry emerged in Topeka associated with both the thirty-five-year-long project to build the capitol and the increasing housing and business markets that the town's growing population created. Topeka's founders had visions of grandeur for the so-called "Golden City." One modern author referred to Topeka in this same era as a "City of Hope."<sup>6</sup> Topeka's civic decision in the 1870s to spur an economic boon through large subsidies to lure major industries resulted in steady growth for the city. However, by the 1890s a continuing influx of black and white migrants, attracted by the promise of Topeka, outpaced the availability of work and increased stress upon the city's resources. Crime also increased, although this was something that at least one promoter of the community spun as "civic progress," arguing that criminals flock to flourishing locales.<sup>7</sup> As the nineteenth century ended, the Reverends Sheldon and Parham operated in this world—a realm in which harshness was considered a portion of daily life and necessary to identify the strong. More importantly, this world presented a place for Christians to fulfill their duty to alleviate the needs of the hurting.

History knows Sheldon as the author of the famous *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?*, but his story remains largely underappreciated, despite the excellent work of his leading biographer Timothy Miller.<sup>8</sup> Born in Wellsville, New York,



Charles Monroe Sheldon, pictured here, was born in Wellsville, New York, in February 1857. Sheldon followed his father into ministry in the Congregational Church, where he gained a reputation for his liberal, progressive thinking. He developed a modern, innovative preaching style that spoke to his congregants, especially young people, in a powerful way: he told stories rooted in everyday experiences from the pulpit. Sheldon took this same approach in his famous expression of the Social Gospel: *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* (1897), penned after his move to Topeka, Kansas, where he spent the bulk of his ministry.

in February 1857, Sheldon was the son of a Congregational minister. Like any ministerial family, the Sheldons moved repeatedly—five times—until they finally settled in South Dakota. In order to obtain an education fitting the son of a Congregational clergyman, Sheldon's family sent him to Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, then on to Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, from which he graduated in 1883. In 1886 Sheldon graduated from Andover Theological Seminary in Newton Centre, Massachusetts, and began his ministry at the Congregational Church in Waterbury, Vermont.<sup>9</sup>

6. Topeka, in the modern era, continues to designate itself as the "Golden City" on the official city seal. Tim Hrenchir, "Choosing a Capital," *Topeka Capital-Journal* (February 9, 2003), as reprinted in Jan Biles, ed., *Topeka Remembers: A Personalized History of the Capital City* (Topeka, Kans.: The Topeka Capital-Journal, 2003), 30; Robert W. Richmond, "Kansas Builds a Capitol," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 38 (Autumn 1972): 249–67.

7. Lawrence H. Larsen, *The Urban West at the End of the Frontier* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1978), 84–85; James R. Shortridge, *Cities on the Plains: The Evolution of Urban Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 241–42.

8. Timothy Miller, *Following In His Steps: A Biography of Charles M. Sheldon* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987); Miller, "Charles M. Sheldon: Pastor, Author, and Passionate Social Reformer," in *John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History*, ed. Virgil W. Dean (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 140–51.

9. Miller, *Following In His Steps*; Glenn Clark, *The Man Who Walked in His Steps* (St. Paul, Minn: Macalester Park Publishing Co., 1946); John W. Ripley, "The Strange Story of Charles M. Sheldon's *In His Steps*," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 34 (Autumn 1968): 241–65; Gary Scott Smith, "Charles M. Sheldon's *In His Steps* in the Context of Religion and Culture in Late Nineteenth Century America," *Fides et Historia* 22 (Summer 1990): 47–69; Ralph Leon Woodworth, "The Life and Writings of Charles M. Sheldon (1857–1946), With Special Reference to His Relations With the Press" (PhD diss., Southern Illinois University, 1983).



Sheldon quickly developed a reputation in Vermont's Congregational circles for his liberal, progressive thinking. Sheldon's message alone, however, was not what separated him from his contemporaries. The reverend developed a modern, innovative preaching style that spoke to his congregants, especially young people, in a powerful way: he told stories rooted in everyday experiences from the pulpit. It was in Waterbury that Sheldon first used this method that would famously shape the rest of his career. The bulk of Sheldon's ministry, however, was performed in Topeka, Kansas. His move to this emerging city on the plains came after meeting his future wife Mary "May" Merriam in 1888 at Waterbury, where she was visiting her grandmother just prior to the family's move to Kansas. May was smitten by the young minister and, perhaps knowing this and also perhaps unwilling to see his daughter move back to Waterbury, Everett B. Merriam helped engineer Sheldon's call to Topeka's Central Congregational Church, a congregation Merriam helped to found. Sheldon was called as the first pastor of the church in 1888, married May in 1891, and in 1897 they had a son, Merriam Ward Sheldon.<sup>10</sup>

Sheldon found what seemed to him a dismal scene when he arrived in Topeka in 1889. The Kansas boom of the mid-1880s had become a bust, especially in the farm sector a couple years before, and manufacturers were beginning to feel the effects of the national economic downturn that would become a serious depression and financial crisis in the early 1890s. Failures in agricultural and industrial life had dashed the confidence of many of the town's working-class citizens and crushed their hopes for equality and success that had accompanied them to the Kansas plains only a few short years before. In many cases, these Topekans became desperate for validation and a new identity. Sheldon spotted this pending identity crisis, and in 1890 began preaching to the members of Central Congregational his "The Statesmanship of Christ" series. In these sermons he noted the mounting problems on the plains and castigated "selfish, greedy land speculators, both East and West" as the parties responsible for the "successive booms and relapses" that troubled the West.<sup>11</sup>

10. Miller, *Following In His Steps*, 23, 40.

11. Charles M. Sheldon, "The Statesmanship of Christ," January 26, 1890, manuscript, Collection 222: Charles Monroe Sheldon/Central Congregational Church, box 1, folder 3, Library and Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka (hereafter cited as "Sheldon/Central Congregational Collection"), second sermon in series, p. 6. On the unsettling social, political, and economic changes that were ongoing in Kansas and elsewhere in the Midwest during the late 1880s and 1890s, as Sheldon was getting settled and launching his Topeka ministry, see Clanton, *A Common Humanity*, 30–60; Miller, "Charles M. Sheldon: Pastor, Author, and Passionate Social Reformer," 142–43; Shortridge, *Cities on the Plains*, 208–21, 240–46.

Sheldon recognized that the era's increasing political unrest, both locally and nationally, further exacerbated the confusion of Kansas settlers. In response to these trying times, Sheldon proclaimed that the "truest statesmanship" was in Christ. He continually reminded Topeka's Christian community where their ultimate citizenship and identity lay—in Heaven. His sermons in this three-part series adapted to and played on the pioneer spirit. In regards to whether whites and African Americans could live together harmoniously, for example, Sheldon asked, "Why not? It never has been done. Well let's do it then. Oh! I am tired of hearing it said, 'You can't do it because it never has been done.'"<sup>12</sup> Instinctively, and in part because of his experience in the Dakotas, Sheldon understood that the West was markedly different from the East. Plains life—characterized by political instability, racial conflict, and the struggle for mere sustenance—demanded adaptation. Sheldon acknowledged that religion, too, must change in order to survive the challenges of the West.

The more time Sheldon spent among the people of Topeka, the more he realized the severity of the city's identity crisis caused by the collision of agricultural life with urbanization. He found the town's residents, who already rested on the outer limits of civilization and on the fringes of the accepted social order, in a game of "catch-up" with the East Coast, constantly trying to prove themselves as sophisticated Americans. Advertisements idealizing the latest New York fashions for both sexes dominated the *Topeka Daily Capital*. The styles were impractical for much of western life and impossibly expensive for most late-nineteenth-century Topekans. The emergence of print advertising and the carefully defined culture it put forward as normative reinforced the idea that Kansans were ignorant, homely, and poor. Furthermore, such advertisements served to remind western readers of something they could only strive for and never fully attain—eastern refinement.

Throughout the 1890s Sheldon launched counterattacks aimed at restoring the confidence of his western audience. In a sermon delivered on May 17, 1896, titled "The Development of a Christian Life," Sheldon tried to encourage his congregation, asserting that physical beauty and wealth were not the most important things in life. The minister proclaimed that he "would rather be a day laborer working for \$1 a day with shovel and pick and able to eat [his] daily meals with pleasure and sleep soundly at night, than be a Vanderbilt with \$100,000,000 and tortured with physical pains unable to eat or sleep or work with any plea-

12. Sheldon, "The Statesmanship of Christ," box 1, folder 3, Sheldon/Central Congregational Collection, chap. 7, p. 8.



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sure." He insisted that real intellectual strength, contrary to that touted by easterners, was not "genius, nor unusual brilliancy." It did not depend "upon the number of books he has mastered or the quantity of facts he has studied or the variety of degrees he can write after his name. Intellectual strength is the result of healthy thinking as much as any thing [*sic*] else." Furthermore, Sheldon defined social refinement not as

a cambric handkerchief and a bottle of perfumery attached to a tailor made young man or woman capable of great powers of endurance in the ballroom or at the high hair party. Neither [*sic*] . . . the possession of a brown stone front house on a fashionable avenue or the ability to live without doing any work. By Refinement [*sic*] I mean the manly and womanly grace which makes life a pleasant and happy life for others. . . . The fulgown [*sic*] man always possesses this refinement whether he dresses in the latest style or not.<sup>13</sup>

13. Charles M. Sheldon, "The Development of a Christian Life," May 17, 1896, manuscript, Collection 201: Charles M. Sheldon, box 1, "Unbound Papers," Library and Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka, pp. 4, 5-6.

Sheldon strove to bolster the confidence of weary westerners and give them a renewed sense of identity by assuring them that they were every bit equal to rich, well-educated, East Coast city-dwellers.

In the second half of "The Development of a Christian Life," Sheldon implored his congregation to seek an "inward grace" instead of focusing on what society deemed culturally acceptable and attractive. The best definition of this "inward grace," according to Sheldon, came from 1 Peter 3:3-4: "Whose *adorning* let it not be the outward *adorning* of plaiting the hair, and of wearing jewels of gold, or of putting on apparel; but *let it be* the hidden man of the heart in the incorruptible *apparel* of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price."

Sheldon challenged his flock to seek "*spiritual beauty*" and God's approval rather than that of their fellows.<sup>14</sup> Their identity as Christians, Sheldon reminded his congregants, did not exist in the fashions and trends of the eastern seaboard, but in Christ. Although this message is a common theme in Christianity, scholars should be careful not to discount its importance to late-nineteenth-century Topekans. To those that labored upon the plains Sheldon presented a

14. *Ibid.*, 8 (emphasis original), 15.





*The more time Charles Sheldon spent among the people of Topeka, the more he realized the severity of the city's identity crisis caused by the collision of agricultural life with urbanization. The unique situation of life on the plains in this period is illustrated in this photo of a Topeka Rapid Transit Company streetcar at its bucolic Oakland Grove terminal. As the car's signage indicates, the other end of the track lay in the heart of urban Topeka at the statehouse.*

Christianity that specifically addressed the concerns of their place. The message of an identity rooted in Christ resonated in a personal way with Sheldon's congregants, many of whom, as members of the working and lower classes, had experienced the pain of losing both their hope and sense of self. This Christianity offered equality and validation to its hearers, a welcome alternative to the message dispatched from the East Coast. Although not a novel development in Christianity, Sheldon's message breathed optimism and a renewed sense of confidence into Topekans.

This identity crisis, coupled with the political instability of the West and a continuing agricultural depression, combined in the 1890s to make plains life evermore difficult. Sheldon, to understand better the hardships of his neighbors, worked at a variety of industrial jobs in Topeka during this period. His experiences among the Exodusters of Topeka's Tennesseetown particularly affected him. Having come to Kansas with high hopes in the late 1870s and the early 1880s, these African American settlers endured the brunt of the economic downturn of the 1890s. Sheldon was convinced that the Exodusters needed more and better jobs in order to improve their situation. The selfishness of the industrial elite, Sheldon believed, was the barrier to full

employment of the Exodusters and other displaced industrial workers in Topeka.<sup>15</sup>

Sheldon did not place all the blame on the industrial elites, though. The larger problem, he believed, was that the sermons being delivered in Topeka's churches "were not affecting the daily lives of his people as they should." The town's Christians, including its businesspeople and leaders, were ignoring traditional didactic sermons and, as a result, the plight of the suffering masses. Affluent Topekans instead, Sheldon asserted, focused on their own prosperity. To solve these problems, Sheldon resolved "to smash every sermonic tradition since the days of St. Chrysostom into smithereens by telling a story from his pulpit."<sup>16</sup> Before moving to Topeka Sheldon had long supported himself through the writing of news-

15. Timothy Miller, "Charles M. Sheldon and the Uplift of Tennesseetown," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 9 (Autumn 1986): 362-75; Miller, "Charles M. Sheldon," 142-44; Thomas C. Cox, *Blacks in Topeka, Kansas, 1865-1915: A Social History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854-2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 143-89.

16. George T. B. Davis, "Charles M. Sheldon, Novelist: The Personality and Career of the Author of 'In His Steps'—His Views on the Religious Novel and the Daily Newspaper—Church of the Future," *Our Day* 18 (March 1899): 73.

paper and magazine articles. He also experimented with what came to be known as “sermon stories” at his first pulpit in Waterbury, Vermont. Lessons learned from these earlier activities helped determine his success in the capital city of Kansas.<sup>17</sup>

Sheldon of course preformed the pastoral duty of encouraging and reassuring his flock during uncertain social, political, and economic times, but he is most remembered for his invention of the sermon story and promotion of the Social Gospel. Though it was a new and unusual measure for its time, the sermon story proved effective in ministering to westerners in a language they understood. These sermon stories document Sheldon’s reaction to the adversities that arose from this new situation on the plains, where and when agricultural and urban life met. Rather than offering his congregation a traditional three-point exposition on a gospel passage, Sheldon told a story that illustrated the biblical message. In the opening chapter of *In His Steps*, for example, Sheldon’s protagonist, the Reverend Henry Maxwell, is interrupted in his sermon writing by a ragged young man in search of a job. The story that follows, in which Maxwell attempts to help the young man, becomes the sermon. In these sermons the gospel message was conveyed not through a theological treatise on the biblical text, but in much the same way the gospel itself was written: as a story. In this innovative medium, Sheldon called for a new kind of Christianity for the West and for the coming twentieth century.

Sheldon’s sermon stories captured the interest of his congregation. Each story ended with a cliffhanger, beckoning those in attendance to return the following week to hear its conclusion. In many of his stories Sheldon specifically targeted students from Washburn College, the future leaders of Topeka, and urged them to use the philosophy of the Social Gospel to confront the problems caused by urbanization. Agrarian life on the plains had not fulfilled the dreams of those who migrated west to own and work the land. The promise that pulled people to the plains—that they could succeed as independent yeomen who supported their families and contributed to the social fabric of the community and the republic—had not been realized. In the rapid industrialization of Topeka, urbanization further marginalized many of these same people. Sheldon believed future leaders had to recognize that the dreams of many Topeka residents were twice dashed. The Social Gospel offered stability, an opportunity for these people to

regain their footing and a chance to begin anew the pursuit of the American Dream—independency. Sheldon also targeted the business elites in his sermon stories, and demanded that they appreciate their reliance upon the laboring classes. From these weekly sermon stories delivered on Sunday evenings emerged Sheldon’s famous *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* After its publication in 1897, Sheldon became the conscience of Topeka as he challenged the growing business ethic that dominated American life, especially its win-at-all-costs mentality.

In particular, Sheldon’s sermon story “The Reformer” (1901–1902) combated this prevailing social thought. The story’s main character, John Gordon, the son of a wealthy banker, is sickened by the pervasive selfishness in the upper class to which he belongs. As is typical in Sheldon’s sermon stories, the Gordon character mediated Sheldon’s own observations and the convictions of his conscience. In “The Reformer” these convictions are summarized in the main character’s assertion

that a life that is content to expend its greatest energies in money making is a life that has not only no attractions for me but it has a positive repulsion. To spend the day in a competitive strife that seeks to get more and more, largely at the expense of the weak and helpless, to spend night after night in dressing up in fine clothing and being amused, to live only with those select companions who are able to dress and eat as well as we are, to be practically ignorant of and absolutely indifferent to the conditions of thousands of human beings in this great city, to have no ideals higher than a commercial standard and have no passions beyond physical appetites—all this is a growing horror to me.<sup>18</sup>

Although it is not posed directly in every story, Sheldon based all his fiction on one underlying question: “What Would Jesus Do?,” the subtitle of his most famous book. In Sheldon’s mind, the business leaders of Topeka, and by extension those of the United States, were not conducting themselves as Jesus would. Troubled by their immoral means and ends and their profiting at the expense of working men and women, Sheldon used “The Reformer” to challenge those who dominated the economic life of the city. He called them

17. Jonathan A. Lindsey, “Sheldon’s Serial Sermons,” *Journal of Library History* 21 (Spring 1986): 362–75; John W. Ripley, “Another Look at the Rev. Charles M. Sheldon’s Christian Daily Newspaper,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 31 (Spring 1965): 1–40.

18. Charles M. Sheldon, “The Reformer,” February 20, 1901, manuscript, Sheldon/Central Congregational Collection, box 2, folder 2, chap. 1, p. 5.





Although it is not posed directly in all of his sermon stories, Sheldon based his fiction on one underlying question: "What Would Jesus Do?," the subtitle of his most famous book. This motto was so fundamental to the pastor and his congregation that it decorated the walls of Topeka's Central Congregational Church, as seen here in this photo of women working on crafts at the parish.

to conduct their affairs as Jesus Christ and his followers did in the New Testament.

In this same sermon story, Sheldon also dared Christians to learn from a surprising source: saloons. Contrary to the churches of Sheldon's day, the preacher argued, saloons identified and met the needs of a hurting people. They gave "the tired working man who has no place worthy to be called a home" somewhere he belonged, a free lunch "to the man whose appetite is never satisfied with ill prepared food," and cheer to "the young man who has no healthy outlet for physical life because he is born without play grounds [*sic*] and without home pleasures." The saloon invited this man, "Come! Enjoy a social glass in a handsome well lighted cheerful room. . . . Come! In the Vaudeville I will amuse you."<sup>19</sup> To any ear, listening or not, Sheldon constantly posed the challenge to live the love of Christ in one's daily life.

Sheldon's stories were not only reactions to but also reflections of the lives of plains settlers. The application of the Social Gospel took a distinctively political turn in the

civically charged atmosphere of Kansas, as evidenced in Sheldon's sermons "The Reformer," "Who Killed Joe's Baby" (1901), "The Narrow Gate" (1903), and his newspaper article "The Devil's Elbow" (1902). Sheldon drew the background and storyline for the sermon story "The Redemption of Freetown" (1898) largely from the existing social and economic situation in Topeka in the late nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> The main character, Judge Vernon, serves as the voice of Sheldon in this piece. In the first pages of the story, the judge reflects on the glaring race and class conflicts in the fictional town of Merton (Topeka) as well as on its rising immorality, demonstrated by the gambling, drinking, and criminal activities of its citizens. This immorality, the judge posits, originates mainly from the impoverished area called Freetown (Tennesseetown) but it has also begun to spread to Merton proper. After mourning his son's recent drinking

19. *Ibid.*, 3–4.

20. Charles M. Sheldon, "The Reformer," box 2, folder 2; Sheldon, *Who Killed Joe's Baby?* (Chicago: Advance Publishing Company, 1901), box 2, folder 1; Sheldon, "The Narrow Gate," 1903, Box 2, Folder 3; Sheldon, "The Devil's Elbow," *Christian World Endeavor*, November 20, 1902, box 2, folder 7; Sheldon, "The Redemption of Freetown," begun February 16, 1898, manuscript, box 1, folder 10, Sheldon/Central Congregational Collection.

and partying, as well as the lack of good Christian men for his daughters to marry, the judge muses:

I cannot help but thinking also of the people in Freetown. In the very heart of our Christian (as we call it) city there is a condition of lawlessness and impurity that very few realize. I see the results of it daily in my court and my heart grows sick as I feel my powerlessness. Somehow . . . I cannot help connecting the crime in Freetown, the dissipation of immorality in that district with the same thing in what we call our best society . . . we have allowed such evils to grow up uncorrected in the right way. It seems to me sometimes as I sit in my solace on the bench that a judgment is hanging over this city so fair in its outward appearance, yet so wrong in much of its human life.<sup>21</sup>

Sheldon saw that in reality Topeka was not the "Golden City" its founders had envisioned, and neither was the West in general a place of hope that offered a chance for a new start.

Through sermon stories such as "The Redemption of Freetown," Sheldon brought the harshness of life on the plains, especially the plight of Topeka's most downtrodden residents, directly into view. Topeka, where agriculturalists and industrialists intersected and prospered, had not birthed a new America; instead the locale inspired a reborn Christianity for the twentieth century. It was one rooted not in financial prosperity, but in the correct understanding of the mission of Jesus. Sheldon's Social Gospel offered a solution to the troubles faced by rural and urban Americans as they sought to find their place in an increasingly industrialized climate. Westerners, searching for freedom, keenly received this message that promised them a path to independence.

Along with reflecting the struggles of the West, the suggestions made by the fictional characters in "The Redemption of Freetown" directly mirrored and, in a sense, commemorated Central Congregational's ongoing efforts to alleviate the suffering of those living in Tennesseetown. In the sermon story the characters propose "meetings to instruct the voters in Freetown along the lines of municipal politics" and "classes in history and political movements." They also plan to open a reading room in the settlement

house staffed and stocked with materials by volunteers and to furnish Sunday School teachers for Freetown. The last chapter of the story speaks to the success of these projects, reporting that

fifteen years ago a district known as "Freetown" settled by Negroes, had the reputation of being the source of more crime and social trouble than any part of the city. . . . Formerly, many a child was shut up in a cabin with other children only a little older, or turned out into the street to play and it was a wonder that more of them did not die. As it was, many babies used to grow up miserably neglected and suffering was common and harmful.<sup>22</sup>

Since that time, however, the fictional Emmanuel Church had constructed a building housing a kindergarten, "a housekeeping department; a reading room . . . a nursery . . . bath rooms and rooms for sewing and industrial work." In the estimation of the narrator the kindergarten is "perhaps, the central force of the settlement. Nothing has been so valuable in lasting results." Topeka's Central Congregational Church undertook an identical program in an effort to redeem Tennesseetown. The results, which were similar to those described in "The Redemption of Freetown," were documented in a pamphlet titled "Across the Way," written by Leroy A. Halbert, a member of Sheldon's congregation.<sup>23</sup>

Through his sermon stories, Sheldon encouraged his congregation to minister to the less fortunate by becoming living manifestations of the love of Christ. Sheldon believed in the life-changing power of the Social Gospel. Speaking through Howard Douglas, the pastor in "The Redemption of Freetown," Sheldon let out a cry of relief and encouragement, "Thank God! . . . 'for Christ and the church.' Why, we can turn the world out of the hand of evil into the arms of good if we only have enough volunteer service like this."<sup>24</sup> At the conclusion of Sheldon's sermon stories society was always made better through the application of the Social Gospel. He believed that offering all people a tangible measure of Christ's love during a time of trial was not only an effective way, but also the best way to evangelize to them.

22. *Ibid.*, chap. 8, pp. 1–3; chap. 7, p. 3.

23. *Ibid.*, chap. 8, pp. 2–3; Leroy A. Halbert, "Across the Way: A History of the Work of Central Church, Topeka, Kansas, in Tennesseetown," January 1, 1900, box 3, folder 6, Sheldon/Central Congregational Collection; Miller, "Charles M. Sheldon and the Uplift of Tennesseetown," 362–75.

24. Sheldon, "The Redemption of Freetown," box 1, folder 10, Sheldon/Central Congregational Collection, chap. 7, p. 5.

21. Sheldon, "The Redemption of Freetown," box 1, folder 10, Sheldon/Central Congregational Collection, chap. 2, pp. 4–5.





Sheldon, to understand better the hardships of his neighbors, worked at a variety of industrial jobs in Topeka. His experiences among the Exodusters of Topeka's Tennesseetown particularly affected him. In his sermon "The Redemption of Freetown," Sheldon's fictional characters directly mirrored and, in a sense, commemorated Central Congregational's ongoing efforts to alleviate the suffering of those living in Tennesseetown, including their founding of a kindergarten that became "the central force of the settlement. Nothing has been so valuable in lasting results." Sheldon is pictured here (right) with students and teachers at the kindergarten built by members of Central Congregational.

Charles Fox Parham was born in Muscatine, Iowa, on June 4, 1873, and died in his home in Baxter Springs, Kansas, on January 29, 1929. Although he died largely in disgrace due to persistent charges of racism and unsubstantiated accusations of sexual misconduct, he maintained a loyal following throughout his ministry and he continues to be seen as the father of the modern Pentecostal movement. Historian James R. Goff, Jr., was correct when he wrote that Parham was an "obscure figure," but one whose "uniqueness and genuine importance as the first legitimate pentecostal prophet deserve fuller treatment."<sup>25</sup> Parham's ministry and the church

that was formed around it were born of his belief that the act of speaking in tongues was a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostalism was, for Parham, the way to restore the early church, which itself was defined by the speaking in tongues at Pentecost as reported in the biblical book of Acts.<sup>26</sup> Parham believed that through this act Christians could experience the fullness of their faith and overcome the formidable challenges of western life.

Parham had little time for formally educated ministers. He began preaching at age fifteen, and despite his affiliation with the Methodist and Holiness movements and the Congregational Church, he was never truly at home in these groups. He was insistent, for example, that the title DD, or Doctor of Divinity, stood for "dumb dogs" and that "seminaries" should be spelled and pronounced "cemeteries."<sup>27</sup> He also began his most important written work, *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness*, with the following words:

25. James R. Goff, Jr., began the process of restoring Parham as the founder of modern Pentecostalism in his essay "Charles F. Parham and His Role in the Development of the Pentecostal Movement: A Reevaluation," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 7 (Autumn 1984): 226–37. He furthered his efforts with *Fields White Unto Harvest: Charles F. Parham and the Missionary Origins of Pentecostalism* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1988). See also, Charles F. Parham, *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness* (Baxter Springs, Kans.: Apostolic Faith Bible College, 1910), 29–38. The charges of sexual misconduct leveled against Parham were eventually dropped, though the fact that they were raised at all greatly tarnished the man's reputation. The precise nature of the charges is still unclear as those who initially reported them were apologists for or critics of the preacher. Some sources hint at adultery, while others point to homosexuality or Parham's being "observed . . . through a keyhole of his door misconducting himself while alone in his room" (Irvine J. Harrison, "A History of the Assemblies of God," ThD diss., Berkeley Baptist Divinity School, 1954). For a full discussion see Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 140n8.

26. Pentecost, or the "fiftieth day," is the Greek name given to the Jewish Festival of Weeks, celebrated fifty days after Passover (see Leviticus 19:15–22; Deuteronomy 16:9–12). In the Christian tradition this celebration took on a new meaning when, after the death of Jesus, the Holy Spirit visited a large crowd in Jerusalem on Pentecost, enabling them to speak in the tongues of the various foreign peoples they were called to proselytize (Acts 2).

27. Charles Fox Parham, as quoted in Ferenc Morton Szasz, *Religion in the Modern American West* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000), 83; Parham, *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness*, 11–20.

The call to preach:—Preachers are born, not manufactured; this fact is proven by the record of nearly all Bible characters. Though modern individuals have many of them chosen the ministry as a profession, either because of its ease and moral atmosphere or from its remunerative value which some have been able to obtain by having reached the upper rounds of the ladder in scholarly attainments. These ministers have drawn many into ethical societies but usually fail in the real conversion an experimental knowledge of salvation from sin, among their adherents.<sup>28</sup>

These sentiments did nothing to make relations between Parham and the Methodist hierarchy pleasant. It caused little concern among the Methodist establishment, therefore, when Parham left the denomination and established his own independent ministry.

Parham's views on formally educated clergy reveal much about his own background, highlighting as they do his "answer your calling" mentality. The minister, who believed himself healed from his own sicknesses by God, preached that one need only embrace faith fully in order to overcome the obstacles life presented. He viewed the church establishment as devoted to stopping young people from fulfilling their God-given vocations:

Most sectarian schools afford the best facilities for back-sliding, the religious influence being often dominated by back-slidden, super-annuated [*sic*] preachers; who, if they are not back-slidden before, are in great danger of it after being superannuated and located in the College town of their denomination; for many of them are not willing to live a quiet and peaceful life, but having been in the habit of having their own way so long, seek to rule the affairs of the Church and College upon old and prosaic lines, and are soon outclassed by younger men of more progressive, and in many cases, deeper spiritual truths.<sup>29</sup>

In this same vein, Parham wrote of his service at age nineteen as a Methodist minister. He declared:

28. Parham, *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness*, 11.

29. *Ibid.*, 15. Parham eventually decreed that full faith was evidenced by glossolalic baptism.



*Charles Fox Parham was born in Muscatine, Iowa, on June 4, 1873, and died in his home at Baxter Springs, Kansas, on January 29, 1929. Parham spent a pivotal few years in Topeka, during which time he founded the modern Pentecostal movement.*

Finding the confines of a pastorate, and feeling the narrowness of sectarian churchism, we were often in conflict with the higher authorities, which eventually resulted in open rupture; and we left denominationalism forever, though suffering bitter persecution at the hands of the church, who seemed determined if possible, our soul should never find rest in this world or the world to come.<sup>30</sup>

Parham was not a sophisticated minister, but a preacher strictly concerned with following God's call upon his life. In many ways, he was a throwback to the frontier preacher of the Second Great Awakening, proclaiming salvation to the lost and the immediacy of God's revelation. He was not preaching, however, only on the frontier. In the late nineteenth century Parham conducted his ministry in a rapidly urbanizing Topeka that was attempting to establish itself as modern and forward thinking.

30. *Ibid.*, 19.



Parham established Bethel College and Bible School in October 1900, and among Topeka's laboring classes, he quickly developed a small following of Bible students who shared his desire to help regular people experience Christ without intermediaries. It was through his interactions with his students, whom he encouraged to examine the biblical text for evidence that attested the presence of the Holy Spirit within the early church, that Parham developed his beliefs about the connection between that presence and the act of speaking in tongues. Once his students and congregants began to directly experience the baptism of the Holy Spirit through the exercise of xenoglossolalia, or speaking in a foreign language that was previously unknown to the speaker, Parham reported their being "besieged with reporters." A *Kansas City Times* journalist noted that

Parham and his wife [Sarah], Miss [Agnes] Ozman and Miss [Lilian] Thistlethwaite are quite intelligent, they wear clothes which fit, and have the appearance of people who frequent the bath; but the others of the "family," as Parham calls them, are about as tacky a looking outfit as one would see in a trip around the world. They may be clean spiritually, but physically they are anything but shining marks of cleanliness.<sup>31</sup>

This view of Parham's followers assigned Pentecostalism to the fringes of mainstream society, where the poor and dispossessed existed. Although others disdained them, Parham befriended the poor. He boasted that his student ministry accepted no collections or solicitations, charged no fee for room and board or tuition, and that "No difference was made whether the students had any means to offer or whether they did not."<sup>32</sup> Parham believed this set his ministry apart from others, and he avowed that his only concern was that his students commit themselves to following the call of God upon their lives.

In Topeka Parham and his wife Sarah E. (Thistlethwaite) Parham, who was raised in the Quaker tradition, along

with their small group of students, began to ask a fundamental question, one well summarized by historian Grant Wacker:

The seekers [Parham and his followers] read that on the Day of Pentecost Jesus's followers experienced Holy Ghost baptism and "began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." This simple story, which had fascinated Christians for nearly 1900 years, raised a question as disturbing as it was provocative. If speaking in tongues accompanied Holy Ghost baptism on the Day of Pentecost, why not now? Indeed, if then, why not always and everywhere?<sup>33</sup>

Parham and his followers concluded that speaking in tongues and the baptism of the Holy Ghost were inseparable. They developed the position that speaking in tongues was the audible signal that God was with them and that this speech served as an empowering tool for evangelism.

Moreover, the gift of tongues gave the marginalized of society, who were judged as generally unimportant, confidence that God was present with them in their everyday lives. Divine gifts such as speaking in tongues, argued historian Ferenc Szasz, "aided the weak and often despised person to confront a hostile and sorrowful world while simultaneously offering 'service' to humanity."<sup>34</sup> Parham instructed his followers to gain this second blessing of the Holy Spirit and to allow it to power the necessary changes in their lives. While Sheldon believed that the business elites of Topeka needed to examine their intentions and behaviors and align them with the teachings of Jesus, in Parham's understanding there was no need to wait for the generosity of another to improve one's lot in life.

Parham was concerned that established churches were losing souls to alternative spiritual outlets. "We do know," warned Parham in *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness*, "that the narrowness of modern church Christianity, by refusing to believe and receive true Bible doctrines has driven many thousands unto Spiritualism, Theosophy, Christian Science and infidelity." In the August 30, 1899, edition of his weekly newspaper, the *Apostolic Faith*, Parham wrote of how "several worldly people have withdrawn from the

31. *Kansas City Times*, January 27, 1901, as quoted in Goff, "Charles F. Parham," 230; Parham, *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness*, 54. Lilian Thistlethwaite was "Parham's sister-in-law and a recipient of both tongues and the gift of interpretation." Goff, *Fields White Unto Harvest*, 69, 82. Xenoglossolalia is different from glossolalia in that the latter is the speaking of an entirely unknown language. Agnes Ozman, for example, spoke xenoglossolally in what was believed to be Chinese. Sarah E. Parham, *The Life of Charles F. Parham: Founder of the Apostolic Faith Movement* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1930), 52–55.

32. Parham, *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness*, 32.

33. Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 5.

34. Szasz, *Religion in the Modern American West*, 83.



From 1898 until 1900 Charles and Sarah Parham conducted their ministry at Bethel Healing Home, a center they established at the corner of Fourth and Jackson streets in a rapidly urbanizing Topeka. The bottom floor housed a chapel, a public reading room, and the printing office where the Parhams produced their newspaper, the *Apostolic Faith*. On the second floor were fourteen rooms devoted to housing and healing the sick.

Mission because they could not stand the preaching against worldliness and the awful tendencies of the age.”<sup>35</sup> Even within his own congregation, Parham recognized the pull upon his followers to look for something beyond what he was providing. Skepticism toward Christianity was rampant, Parham believed, because the established Christian leadership of Kansas had failed to preach aggressively the true gospel of Jesus. Parham believed that he and his followers were prepared to challenge Topeka’s established churches because the Spirit would provide the downtrodden with the authority, confidence, and power necessary to overcome any opposition to equality and egalitarianism.

Although Parham expected a revolution, he was not a revolutionary in the classical political sense. He declared: “We are satisfied that in the coming industrial revolution,

35. *Apostolic Faith*, August 30, 1899; Parham, *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness*, 29. Parham’s *Apostolic Faith* was published in Topeka for about a year from 1899 until 1900. A paper of the same name was later published by a former student of Parham’s, William J. Seymour, who began his publication in 1906 out of his mission on Azusa Street in Los Angeles, California.

Babylon will fall, and that with fire and sword the masses will utterly destroy the modern churches with vengeance, and they will be permitted of God to punish them for their pride, pomp, deadness, dearth, and unfaithfulness and almost lack of caring for the interest of the poor.” This revolution would help Christians focus their attention upon the saving grace of Jesus, rather than upon the promise of some fleeting political or economic gain. “The Lord demands today of every true follower that he drop narrow creedism, sink denominationalism into oblivion, accept the full gospel with all its gifts and graces, and purify their hearts for His soon coming, or be lost in the chaos and darkness of the coming overthrow of nations in the ‘struggle of the classes.’”<sup>36</sup> For Parham, the immediacy of revelation was always central to his thinking. He recognized social injustice, but always understood it through the context of his

36. Parham, *The Everlasting Gospel* (Baxter Springs, Kans.: Apostolic Faith Bible College, 1942), 32.



THE APOSTOLIC FAITH.

# BETH-EL

## DIVINE :- HEALING :- HOME

### And Mission.

Home.

Attractive Divine healing Christian rest, corner Fourth and Jackson Sts., Topeka. Modern conveniences; centrally located. Morning and evening prayers, 7 to 7:30. Guests can be transferred at station and get off at entrance. The object of the Home is to provide home-like comforts to all who seek healing and a temporary stopping place for a friend while at the capital city. Terms to guests, \$4 to \$7 per week, unless they are worthy poor, when other arrangements will be made. No charges are made in this work but for board to cover actual expense of the guest's entertainment.

Mission Services.

Sunday, 11 a. m., Holiness.  
2 p. m., Sunday School.  
3 p. m., Divine Healing.  
7:30 p. m., Evangelistic.

Tuesday, 3 p. m., Ladies' Healing Study.

Wednesday, 7:30 p. m., School of Prophecy.

GENERAL THEME—A living Christianity.

Teachings.

Salvation by faith; healing by faith, laying on of hands and prayer; sanctification by faith; coming (pre-millennium) of Christ; the baptism of the Holy Ghost and Fire, which seals the Bride and bestows the gifts. I. Cor. 12.

Divine Healing is opposed by anti-Christian heresies of mind healing, Christian science, spiritualism and trance mesmerism. i. Tim. 6:26, 21; i. Tim. 4:1, 2; Isa. 51:22, 23.

**Chas. F. Parham and  
Eleanor S. Parham**

**Cor. of Fourth and Jackson Sts.**

**Pastors in Charge.**

**Topeka, Kansas.**

*This advertisement for the Parhams' Bethel Healing Home, which appeared in the August 9, 1899, edition of their Apostolic Faith, outlines the mission of the home and, more broadly, of the Parhams' entire ministry.*

eschatology. Parham's goal was to help his listeners discover the power available to them through the Holy Spirit.

The place where Parham ministered—Topeka, Kansas—exposed him to the harshness of urbanization and this, in turn, shaped his message. Unlike Topeka's industrial elites, Parham did not see economic difficulty as a mechanism through which the strong could separate themselves from

the weak. This conviction led him to open an "Employment Bureau" and to join "The Industrial League," a group organized by philanthropic Topekans "for the purpose of helping deserving working people of the city disposed to help themselves to secure vacant lots and seeds to plant gardens . . . and for the purpose of cultivating a sentiment in favor of industry and frugality among our people." Parham

also used his newspaper to argue that caring for working Topekans' worldly needs would lead to their conversion. In the October 18, 1899, edition of the *Apostolic Faith* Parham published a piece written by C. H. Woolston, "How to Reach the Workingman," in which the author asserted that the best way to reach the laborer "is to put yourself in his place, think and reason as he does, and then as a plain man win his heart, and the rest will follow as the day follows the night."<sup>37</sup> For Parham, a straightforward approach to spreading the gospel was the key to assisting the struggling workers of Topeka. He believed that it was essential that those in need embrace the Christian faith, but he also recognized that this was more easily accomplished with food in the stomach. Responding to the needs of the community, therefore, Parham reported on January 1, 1900, the New Year's feeding of three hundred people at his Bethel College and Bible School in Topeka.<sup>38</sup> Parham's reactions to the challenges posed by his place distinctly shaped the form of his ministry.

Both Charles Sheldon and Charles Parham wanted to improve the lives of those who had failed in their attempts to make a life by cultivating the harsh plains and who had not found relief in the bleak opportunities afforded them in a rapidly urbanizing Topeka. Christianity, these pastors believed, offered hope to all struggling Topekans. Sheldon and Parham simply embraced different models of the same faith as the solution to the problems of modernity. Sheldon wanted first to alleviate the social problems of his listeners before converting them to Christianity. Parham believed that solutions to the challenges of life in Kansas would follow the embrace of full faith, evidenced by speaking in tongues. An article entitled "What Would Jesus Do?" printed and endorsed by Parham in the April 15, 1900, edition of the *Apostolic Faith* best illustrated the two men's different approaches to solving the problems of their community. Author Fred Deem laid the question before Sheldon: Is "it possible to do as Jesus would do without the same kind of working faith Jesus had?"<sup>39</sup> For Parham it was clear that the only way to address the harsh conditions of life on the plains, in a town more concerned with urban growth than caring for its poor, was through the embrace of the second blessing.

37. C. H. Woolston, "How to Reach the Workingman," *Apostolic Faith*, October 18, 1899; "Employment Bureau," *Apostolic Faith*, March 22, 1899; "The Industrial League," *Apostolic Faith*, April 21, 1899.

38. Charles F. Parham, "Food For All," *Apostolic Faith*, January 1, 1900.

39. Fred Deem, "What Would Jesus Do?," *Apostolic Faith*, April 15, 1900.

In his estimation, Pentecostalism and not the Social Gospel was the key to alleviating the needs of Topekans as the twentieth century began.

Sheldon and Parham offered Topeka's downtrodden a path to independence through new interpretations of the Christian life. "Parham," wrote Goff, "had come to Topeka optimistically expecting to win all social classes over to his revolutionary doctrine of divine health."<sup>40</sup> His optimism was rooted in the belief that the new industrial city offered a fresh start for its inhabitants and a place for plains Americans to rebuild their futures absent the hardships of the agrarian world. Instead, they encountered new and different difficulties due to the social and economic stratification that dominated urban life. In the "Golden City" of Topeka, the combination of stresses provided by rural and urban challenges created a financially and socially troubled populace desperate to believe in something. These ingredients produced a fertile breeding ground for new religious movements. Sheldon gave the city the Social Gospel, while Parham gave it Pentecostalism. Both offered Topekans a new Christianity for the new challenges posed by their place.

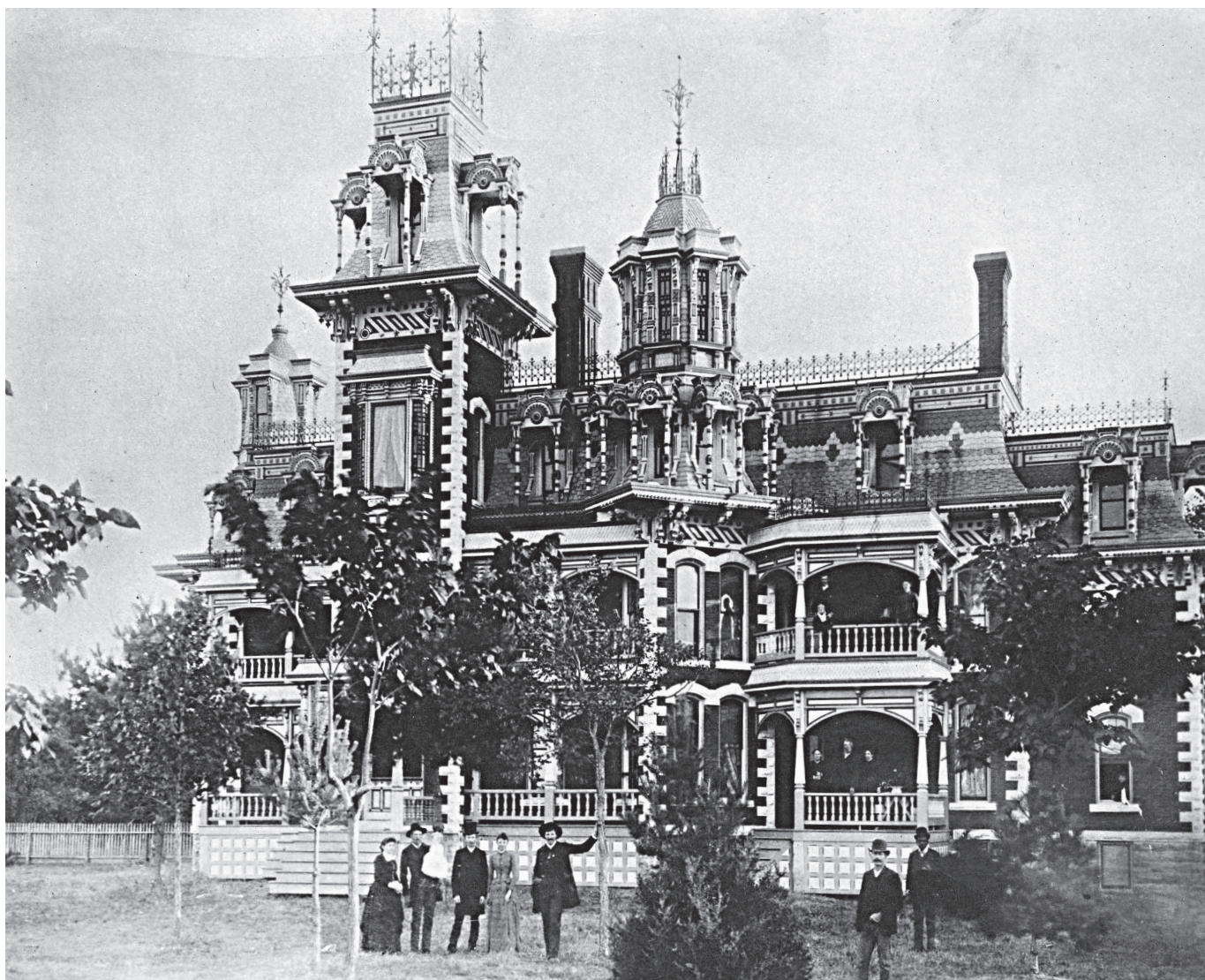
Sheldon and Parham answered the call to help those around them with faiths shaped by western life. Both men, despite their different tactics, believed that the self-improvement of those squeezed by agrarian failure and industrial disappointment began with a vital Christianity. On the Kansas plains, settlers strove to realize the dream of equality and egalitarianism. Sheldon saw the realization of that dream was possible in Topeka. He believed the attitude of perseverance that shaped agrarian Kansans would translate well into an industrial setting if they received a fair opportunity to succeed. It was the responsibility of urban leaders to emulate Jesus while dealing with their neighbors by giving workers every chance to actualize their dreams.

Parham believed the key to a better Topeka was a body of fully converted Christians who experienced the power and authority that came with the gift of the Spirit. His intense end-times mentality anticipated the advent of the millennial age of peace and prosperity after Christ's second coming and resulted in a less patient approach than post-millennial thinkers, like Sheldon, who believed the thousand-year age of peace would precede Christ's return.<sup>41</sup> Parham's life experience was one in which those of full faith gained the personal strength to overcome life's obstacles, including sickness. Like Sheldon, Parham embraced the persevering nature of Kansans, but he saw

40. Goff, *Fields White Unto Harvest*, 49.

41. For more on Parham's eschatology, see Parham, *The Everlasting Gospel*, 98–117; Parham, *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness*, 127–38.





*Parham established Bethel College and Bible School in October 1900 in this partially completed mansion, called "Stone's Folly" after its failed builder and Topeka real estate magnate Erastus Stone. It was during the year and a half that the Parhams ran their school in this house that first one and then others of their students began speaking in tongues and the modern Pentecostal movement was born. After losing their lease on the property in mid-1901 to its new owner, Topeka bootlegger Harry Croft, the Parhams traveled extensively conducting Bible schools and revivals before settling in Baxter Springs.*

it as something well suited to individual power. He did not want Topekans to wait on their community leaders for assistance. Instead, he called people to strive for the gift of the second blessing so that they could grasp God's vision for their lives themselves.

In the ministry models Sheldon and Parham left to twentieth-century Americans, the targeted audiences were those in need—largely working laborers. In Topeka, Sheldon and Parham saw hopes for independency dashed by the harshness of life on the plains, raised again by the promise of industrialization, and then ultimately left unfulfilled by urbanization. Both men believed their flocks' commitments to perseverance was insufficient without a deeper Christian faith. Sheldon concluded that such faith depended upon its practitioner first finding self-respect and hope through the steadying influences of the Social Gospel. Parham believed that it was dependent upon one believing in and embracing the fullness of the Spirit as evidenced in glossolalic baptism.

Sheldon and Parham ministered in the same Topeka community, yet seemingly inhabited different worlds and largely ignored each other. Their impact upon modern American Christianity is, nevertheless, both profound and similar. In the modern era Sheldon's *In His Steps* is core reading for evangelicals, and the concept of and the phrase "What Would Jesus Do?" is a phenomenon within many Protestant circles. The Pentecostal movement remains intensely focused upon missions. In Parham's view, speaking in tongues was a gift designed to support evangelical efforts, so he no doubt would embrace the rapid and con-

tinuing growth of global Pentecostalism. It is, moreover, accurate to argue that both those who wrestle with Sheldon's message and those who embrace Parham's commitment to glossolalia continue to share the central concern of these two men, which was formed by the needs of Topekans at the beginning of the twentieth century. Sheldon's and Parham's ministries focused on providing a sense of belonging to the disposed. People want to belong somewhere and to something; they want their lives to have purpose. One need only to read current evangelical bestsellers such as *The Purpose Driven Church* and *The Purpose Driven Life* or the dominant Pentecostal understanding of missions as epitomized in *Called and Empowered* to understand how little American Christianity has departed from the vision of Sheldon and Parham as they addressed the concerns of their place.<sup>42</sup>

As the nineteenth century became the twentieth, Topeka sat not only in the middle of the United States physically, but also served as a model of the nation's economic, social, and cultural unease as urbanization became the norm. The struggles of Topeka's working classes suggested to Sheldon and Parham that the evangelical methods of their predecessors were no longer sufficient. The newly emerging America was not a place where independency would reign, but instead was a world in which people were increasingly interdependent. To address the needs of this world Christians needed to replace the old models of outreach with something new, and to this end Sheldon offered the Social Gospel and Parham Pentecostalism. These men embraced new forms of Christian ministry adapted to the place where they lived, and their creations still resonate across and shape the American religious landscape. [KH]

42. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, Minn.: Zondervan, 1995); Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, Minn.: Zondervan, 2002); Murray A. Dempster et al., eds., *Global Mission in Pentecostal Perspective* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991).